









GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY

*Families*

[ 7 pages ]

1/19







GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19



This speech is especially for Native people. For our families, our grandparents and great grandparents who were taken from their homes as children and were forced to attend white missionary schools far away. Schools that repressed our culture and tried to beat the Indianness out. For Native parents who have lost their children because of death, adoption, substance abuse and Christianity. For Native children who live in shame because they are subjected to degrading remarks and attitudes by their teachers and peers. For Native children whose parents are not well, whose parents abuse them because of alcohol and drug addiction. For the thousands of Native youth who died before the age of 18 and for those who will die. For Native people locked away in prisons for lifetimes because of a justice system that performs like the calvary of the 1800's. For Native people who have the highest unemployment rate of any people in our own land. For Native people who lack adequate health care and most of whom have no health insurance. For the countless Native women who were sterilized without their permission. For the Native children used in medical experiments without their permission. For our Native culture which continues to be plundered by the New Age movement. They appropriate our spiritual beliefs, our religious instruments, ~~our sage and sweet grass~~, our sweats, our ancestors and our stories. For every Native person who endured the inquisitive white person, or the white person who tells us that their great grandmother was Cherokee, a princess. For our grandparents, great grand parents, our aunts and uncles who died with deep and profound sadness in their hearts because of the losses, the lies.

This speech is especially for lesbians. For those of us who attempted suicide as teenagers believing we were the only ones, the only ones in small towns or reservations. For those of us were were lesbian bashed by members of our families. For those of us who were kicked out of our homes, disowned by our families. For those of us who still live in shame because of the denial of who







GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19

2

we are by our families.<sup>3</sup> For our children who have been taken away by courts and former spouses. For our lovers who cannot come to family gatherings and if they do, we must forsake the sanctity of our love for one another. For those of us who believe that we are not allowed to have families, to raise children because of our sexual orientation. For those of us whose lovers died and we cannot share our pain and grief with our families. For those who have children and suffer their anger at us for being lesbian. For those who have been committed to institutions, subjected to cruel treatments to cure us of our sexual orientation. For lesbians in prisons who fear and experience brutal attacks. For those of us who cannot bring our lovers to work-related events. For those of us who can only say our lover is a friend or roommate on hospital forms.<sup>4</sup> For those of us who have children and have been called breeders by other lesbians and gay men. For those of us who are old and abandoned in homes for the elderly and no one comes to see us. For those of us who live alone without community or family support. For Native Lesbians and Lesbians of Color who experience racism from white lesbians. For those of us who are battered by our lovers, domestic partners and are afraid and ashamed to break the cycle of domestic violence. For those who have committed suicide because of racism, homophobia, self-hatred and destitution. For those of us who have been murdered due to homophobia and Indian-hating.<sup>5</sup>

This speech is for all of us who are healing, recovering, trying to be good people, seeking truth and to be truthful. For all of us who have suffered in the name of family, in the name of god and in the name of the U.S. government.







GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19

3

God, government, family. God is supposed to be about peace and acceptance. Government is supposed to be about freedom and justice. Family is supposed to be about trust and love. But most of us have suffered tremendous pain and humiliation in the name of these entities. Some of us are spending entire lifetimes recovering from childhood abuse.<sup>6</sup> Some of us are spending generations recovering from and resisting government genocide of our culture, appropriation of our lands, holocaust of our people and animals. Some of us are recovering from being labeled evil by people who claim to speak for God. In the name of these entities, we have been bashed, banished or shot in the back.

I seek solace from truth but I also want truth to be spoken, to be told. I saw a man get shot in the back when I was a child on my reservation. It was at night, a spotlight from the state police was shining on him as he ran toward the safety of the trees lining the creek. He was running, then he abruptly fell from the bullet. I ~~can't~~<sup>no longer</sup> remember the sound of the gun being fired.<sup>7</sup> I can only recall his vulnerability under the spotlight. My friend Mani was leaving a gay bar in Phoenix with his friend Marcus. Two ~~young~~ gay Indian men walking gleefully home, taking a short cut through the alley. They were both shot in back of their heads, only a few feet from the bar. Truth is like that, ripping through us, stark, spare, harsh as broken shards of skullbone, cutting deep into our hands, our faces, our hearts. We cannot always be certain when personal truths will crush us or when political truths will kill us.

My great grandmother's face was deeply etched, landscaped by her age and by the horrendous spiritual and cultural changes she experienced.<sup>8</sup> I met her in the late 1950's when she was very old and I was very young. Her home was a one room, dimly lit log cabin. She left the front door open, allowing a stream of of sunlight to shine into her home. I sat on her lap, noticing the lines on her face and that she had braids like mine. I often recall this memory because it gives me strength, a sense of my place in the world, even my place in history.





Digitized by the Internet Archive  
in 2026 with funding from  
CLIR DHC Grant 2026-2028



GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19



~~I often recall this memory because it gives me strength, a sense of my place in the world, even my place in history.~~ I like to say that I am a hand away from the 1800's because I touched her. My hand touched her and she put her arms around me as I sat on her lap. I want to hear her speak to me again, in the only language she spoke. This can only happen if I write in her voice, telling the truth of her life. The truth of her life, all that she suffered and lost still to be reconciled by all non-Native people who reside in this country, on this continent.

The first act of President Clinton should have been honoring the treaties that his and your government made with my people. Somewhere in the heart of every Native person, whether or not they are aware of it, is the longing for this truth to occur. And somewhere in our hearts is the knowledge that we are betrayed everyday, in the 1990's by the refusal of this government and its citizens and residents to deal with past and continuing transgressions against us.

Indian people have suffered greatly for a very long time. Yet we have survived even when it seemed to be the bleakest. Our statistics are still horrible. We have ~~the~~ the highest suicide rate, the highest unemployment rate and ~~probably have~~ the worst health of any people in this country. The average life expectancy for Native women is 45. A few years ago it was 42.

I spent most of last week in Phoenix, Arizona at the 4th annual Wellness and Health Promotion Conference for Native women. There were over 2,000 Indian women in attendance at the conference that focuses on the wellness of Native women. ~~I found it personally gratifying to experience this event because it~~ <sup>deeply</sup> ~~represents~~ <sup>The conference represents</sup> another step in our healing process as Native people. Death and dying have been the companions to our our survival. At the conference, in many different workshops, we talked about our pain and grieving, about death and dying, but also about how to take better care of ourselves so that someday, we







GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19

5

will not have the worst health status, and the average live expectancy of Native women can reach far beyond 45 years of age.

At the conference, I thought alot about how fortunate I am to be living my adult life not in recovery from the savagery of a dysfunctional family. I am truly one of the fortunate ones even amongst my people. This is not to say that I have not been witness to painful situations or experienced my share. But it is clear to me that the institution of family needs to be reclaimed. There is a common family thread between Native people and lesbians. Our right to an autonomous family structure has been ruptured, attacked and denied.

The family and extended family is essential to the survival of Native people. Lesbians, in particular, are attempting to redefine and reshape the families we create with close friends, with our children, our animals. We need to do this for our survival but we also need to be careful that we do not <sup>create</sup> a singular definition of a lesbian family.

My grandparents raised me in a predominately traditional Lakota manner. Grandparents are the most important individuals in a traditional Lakota child's life. Ina and Ate, Mom and Dad, are not less important but by elevating the grandparents, the pressure is relieved between children and parents. This arrangement allows for more flexibility and less opportunity for conflict and confrontation between children and parents.

All of our relatives have distinct roles and responsibilities. Older cousins provide care and fun for the younger ones. I had male cousins who were charged with the responsibility of taking care of me, ensuring that I was safe, having fun. I am certain they would have preferred to be with their peers but it was their duty and responsibility to take care of me when adults were busy.

I was treated as a very special person by my grandparents so I did not have to do any chores, except fun ones like feeding corn husks to our horses in the summer or occasionally taking corn to the chickens. My grandfather let me accompany him when he did his ranch chores. I only had to provide my company. I talked constantly but I wasn't shushed away like an inconvenience, or like I was less important because of my child status.

In the summer of 1991, I co-facilitated a parenting workshop at a conference for Native lesbians and gay men who <sup>are</sup> working in HIV education and prevention. The parenting workshop was attended almost exclusively by gay







GLC 63  
CAMERON

SPEECHES

FAMILY, [199-]

[7 pages]

1/19

6

native men. We talked about our families and our places in them. Every gay Indian man saw himself as an experienced parent because they had served as uncles and older cousins. They had responsibility for raising the younger ones. None of them felt shame as men who had taken care of children and who still take care of children.

Traditional Lakota family life is very structured and based on common sense, therefore sensible and disciplined. There is to be no confusion about one's place in the family. The structure exists to ensure that no one is left out, unimportant. It exists to ensure that everyone has responsibility for someone else. And our greetings to non-family members is to call them by a name that designates a family position. Thus everyone is either cousin, uncle, aunt, brother or sister, making it less likely that <sup>acts</sup> ~~acc~~ of sexual abuse will occur against anyone.

By reclaiming family, we are reclaiming humanity and dignity. It is about seeking truth in our relationships, not just about freedom to have biological or contractual relationships. And it is has to address the issue of power inequity between adults and youth and children.

The external trappings of the lesbian/gay community appear to be rejecting dominant culture themes and systems but in reality, we mirror the very societal beliefs that have oppressed us. We work at dehumanizing one another in the name of lesbian and gay liberation. We do this by peer pressure, by labeling such as calling mothers and moms breeders, or if a woman is 50 and without children, then she is outed as a lesbian whether she is one or not. If you don't choose to identify yourself as queer, then you are labled a traitor, an assimilationist, a collaborationist with absolute disregard for one's history with absoulte intent on destroying basic dignity. For a long time, lesbian mothers with boy children were subjected to severe ostracsism by other lesbians. It is deplorable how lesbians and gay men are regarded and treated in this country but we <sup>how often</sup> treat one another is equally deplorable.

I briefly described the family structure that I come from. Family systems and relationships for Native people and people of color differ vastly from









the dominant culture. The differences do have an impact on race relations because at least for Native people, those differences are centered on what we value and treasure as important. I find that I am often in resistance to the dominant white culture whether it is heterosexual or lesbian and gay.

At the Golden Gate Park in San Francisco, live about 6 or 7 buffalo. Sometimes when I miss the prairies of South Dakota, I go to their field and stand by the fence, looking at them, thinking about home, thinking about the buffalo, and all different kinds of people walk by looking at the buffalo too. They, of course, don't have an affinity and perhaps mistakenly believe these are the only ones left. I look at the buffalo and wonder if they too long for the freedom of fenceless prairies, I wonder if they too get bored with the fog and want thunder and lightning instead. Sometimes the buffalo turn to look at me and we stare at each other for a while. The buffalo in my Lakota culture are the keepers and protectors of women. When I think about that, it then makes sense to me that our buffalo were thoughtlessly and cruelly slaughtered. Their slaughter symbolizes the treatment of all women in this country,

I focused on family tonight because that is the place where most of us learn about telling the truth, hiding the truth and the responsibility of truth. It is the dynamics of family that makes many of us identify as survivors. I talked about my family because the truth of my life, who I am is intricately woven with how my culture views family. When I come to participate in meetings or events, I don't come by myself. My people come with me, our history comes with me, my grandmother and grandfather come with me, what is happening to Native people today comes with me, what is happening to Native women comes with me.

When we think about wars and the impact of wars on women, we can't forget the wars in this country, domestic violence is the war at home, child abuse is the war at home, rape is the war at home, murder of women and girl children is the war at home and that is the truth of our lives in this country.











